

Demographic shifts bring uncertainty to largest city

Yanyi K. Djamba

Montgomery Advertiser

March 31, 2009

Birmingham is the most populated area in Alabama, even though its population has steadily declined in the last decades. According to the Census Bureau, 265,968 people lived in Birmingham in 1990. In 2000 the population declined to 242,820, and most recent estimates show 229,800 as the population of Birmingham. Who are these people and what are their household and family structures?

This article is the second in the series of demographic spotlights on Alabama cities. The first spotlight, which was published in the *Advertiser* on Feb. 13, presented the socio-demographic characteristics of the city of Montgomery, Alabama.

Founded in 1871, Birmingham is a centrally located Southeastern city with a demographic structure similar in many aspects to the state population, with the exception of racial composition. The average household size in Birmingham is 2.3 people, a number similar to the state average of 2.48. Families make up 58 percent of the households in Birmingham. This figure includes both married-couple families (28 percent) and other families (30 percent). The average family size in Birmingham is 3.05, which is similar to the state average of 3.04 people per family.

Non-family households make up 42 percent of all households in Birmingham. Most of the non-family households are people living alone, but some are composed of people living with roommates or non-family members.

Like the state of Alabama as a whole, Birmingham's foreign-born population accounts only for about 3 percent of the city population. In fact, most Birmingham residents do not change their place of residence.

Recent data from the American Community Survey show that about 77 percent of all Birmingham residents age one and older are living in the same residence in which they were living one year earlier; 18 percent had moved during the past year from another residence in the same county; 3 percent had moved from another county in Alabama; 2 percent had moved from another state, and less than 0.5 percent moved to Birmingham from abroad.

Five percent of Birmingham residents age 5 and older speak a language other than English at home. Of these, 62 percent speak Spanish and 38 percent speak some other language; 56 percent reported that they do not speak English "very well," according to the Census Bureau.

Marriage is rare in Birmingham. Only 35 percent of Birmingham male residents age 15 and older are married; the marriage rate is even lower among female residents in the same age category (29 percent). This gender difference in marital status is partly due to a skewed sex ratio (81 men per 100 women age 15 and older).

Unlike Montgomery where most births occur out of marriage, only about 33 percent of births are out-of-wedlock in Birmingham. The national figure is about the same, at 33.5 percent.

As a metropolitan place, Birmingham population is quite educated. Eighty-one percent of people 25 years and over have at least graduated from high school and 21 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. Like many other cities, Birmingham's work force is experiencing sharp downsizing and employment loss.

According to recent statistics from the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, the unemployment rate in the Birmingham-Hoover metropolitan area increased from 3.9 percent in January 2008 to 7.4 percent in January 2009. Among those who work, the majority are in educational services, health care, and social assistance (24 percent) and in retail trade (12 percent). Any layoff in these industries will automatically affect thousands of people.

Most Birmingham employees (77 percent) drive to work alone, 14 percent carpool, 2 percent take public transportation, and 3 percent use other means of transportation. Only 2 percent work at home. Among those who commute to work, it takes them on average 21.9 minutes to get to their place of work. The commute time is just a few minutes longer than in Montgomery.

The majority of Birmingham residents are black (75 percent); whites account for nearly one-fourth of the population (23 percent). This black-white racial composition is the opposite of the state figures of 70.3 percent white and 26.3 black. The Hispanic population represents nearly 3 percent in both Birmingham and the state.

According to the 2005-2007 data, 22.4 percent of families in Birmingham were below poverty level. This is higher than the state figure of 12.9 percent. In terms of individuals, 27.1 percent of Birmingham residents were below poverty level, compared to 16.8 percent of Alabamians.

Birmingham children are disproportionately affected by economic hardship. Even before the official recession time, about 42 percent of children under the age of 18 in Birmingham were below the poverty level, compared with 19 percent of people 65 years old and over in 2005-2007. These figures may have increased due to current job losses.

Despite these issues, Birmingham remains a major Southeastern city. However, the current changes in population size and composition suggest that this important cultural and educational metropolitan area will experience major demographic shifts that may result in socio-economic consequences for years to come.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University at Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.